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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 001661

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SUBJECT: ALGERIA'S NATIONAL RECONCILIATION PLAN

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) Algeria is emerging from a decade of terrorist violence and massive bloodshed beginning in the early 1990's and is now looking to take necessary steps to allow the country to heal its wounds. Much like his 1999 platform of Civil Concord, President Bouteflika's 2004 presidential campaign was anchored by his platform of "National Reconciliation". Several sources and the press have commented that Bouteflika considers National Reconciliation to be his legacy and will invest considerable political capital to ensure that it happens. What "National Reconciliation" actually entails has been the subject of much speculation and debate over the past year. Bouteflika has not explained the details of National Reconciliation nor its major component, General Amnesty, to be presented for popular approval through a referendum. This lack of specificity has not dissuaded many people from expressing support or disapproval for the referendum.

2. (C) Bouteflika first proposed the holding of an amnesty referendum before a October 31, 2004 gathering of African Union terrorism experts. The Algerian media have reported that the referendum will take place before the end of the year with President Bouteflika likely to clarify his intentions in an August 14 address. Our sense is that most Algerians are tired after over a decade of terrorism and would be induced to give the benefit of doubt to the national reconciliation process in the hope that it would be the death knell for remaining terrorist elements, now largely confined to mountainous areas. That said, in light of statements by some Algerian Islamists in support of the recent murders of two Algerian diplomats in Iraq, Bouteflika may have lost support for granting amnesty to the same genre of terrorists who were involved in the Iraq murders. Bouteflika may need to reconsider the type of amnesty included in the initiative in order to garner a convincing level of support to pass what he considers to be his legacy. (End Summary and Comment)

INTRODUCTION

3. (C) Algeria is emerging from a decade of terrorist violence and massive bloodshed beginning in the early 1990's and has made great strides in normalizing daily life. One element which led to the drastically improved security situation was the 1999 Civil Concord, in which 6,000 former terrorists and their sympathizers, who were not convicted of murder, were granted amnesty by the GOA. Although the Concord led to a dramatic reduction in attacks and allowed warring elements back into society to live peacefully, it was not without its flaws. The main flaws, as viewed by Algerians, were the lack of transparency (the trials were closed to the public) and the lack of thorough investigations into alleged criminal/terrorist acts perpetrated by those given amnesty. Civil Concord was key to Bouteflika's legacy for his first term of office, and he reportedly views National Reconciliation as the next logical step in adding to the legacy in his second term. However, the problem for many Algerians is that, unlike the 1999 Concord, the details of this General Amnesty and National Reconciliation plan have not yet been divulged.

CHANGE FROM GENERAL AMNESTY TO NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

4. (C) Bouteflika's emphasis has changed over the last two months from "General Amnesty" to "National Reconciliation" when he discovered the term "General Amnesty" was unpopular with a majority of Algerians, who closely linked the term with impunity. Also, Algerians did not want to duplicate the mistakes of the 1999 Civil Concord, namely the lack of proper trials/investigations and transparency. While the plan may not have changed, the term National Reconciliation was thought to be softer and less controversial than its predecessor. From an Islamic point of view, reconciliation was viewed in a positive light and Bouteflika has used this to his advantage. Additionally, after the murders of two Algerian diplomats in Iraq, the subsequent statements by both the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) and the former deputy head of the banned FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) condoning/encouraging the murders, and the obvious

link between GSPC and Al Qaida, have led many Algerians to question how Bouteflika could amnesty the very people who perpetrated this barbaric act, further pushing Bouteflika away from an emphasis on amnesty.

WHO WILL LIKELY BENEFIT FROM NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

15. (C) Although details about National Reconciliation have not been released, there has been speculation about who will likely benefit from the plan. Embassy sources speculate that only members of terrorist groups will benefit from any amnesty included in the plan. In his recent speeches, Bouteflika spoke highly of the Army and the Security Forces and continually referred to them as 'Martyrs of the Nation'. According to sources, in Bouteflika's view, the Security Forces in general have done nothing wrong, and any criminal acts attributed to them were perpetrated by individuals operating outside the scope of their authority. To date, Bouteflika has skillfully handled the military by repeatedly praising its participation in defeating the Islamic terrorist threat to the republic, while pushing it towards a change of mission from internal politics to external defense of the country. His focus on crimes perpetrated by terrorists rather than by the military follows the logic of an implicit trade-off between military acceptance of Bouteflika's exercise of civilian authority over military retirements and prosecutions in return for shielding the military from even a hint of retribution for "excesses" during the 1990s.

WHAT IS NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

16. (C) President Bouteflika's 2004 presidential campaign was anchored by his platform of "National Reconciliation," the exact definition of which has been elusive at best. During his July 5, 2005 Independence Day speech, Bouteflika shed some light on the big picture of National Reconciliation without divulging any details of the plan. He stated that "Algerians should forgive but not forget, accepting thus another sacrifice on the altar of their country, which has bled enough for its independence, and since its independence. It is starting from these considerations that I have launched the initiative of a policy of National Reconciliation, with the objective of putting a definite end to the violence and allowing our society to go beyond its antagonisms and heal its wounds." Government officials have publicly given their full support to Bouteflika's plan, even without knowing its content. The public does not yet know who will be amnestied (security forces and/or terrorists), what crimes will be amnestied (economic, murder, rape, supporting terrorism), or if those amnestied will be granted amnesty following judicial proceedings out of which the full extent of their crime would come to light. Additionally, the media reported that a referendum on National Reconciliation will take place before the end of the year, giving Bouteflika little time to hash out his plan in detail and then garner support for it.

SETTING THE EXAMPLE

17. (C) His symbolic step towards National Reconciliation was his cancellation of the June 19 holiday celebrating the 1965 coup that brought former President Boumediene to power at the expense of then President Ben Bella. Ben Bella recently publicly forgave all those involved in his overthrow and advised all Algerians to do the same. To add further symbolism to the opening act of National Reconciliation, Bouteflika named the elderly Ben Bella as honorary President of the National Commission for General Amnesty. He also treated -- and publicly embraced -- Ben Bella at a lavish November, 2004 ceremony celebrating the 50th anniversary of the war of liberation against France.

WHO IS IN FAVOR OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION?

18. (C) The answer to this question was clearer before the murders of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad July 27. The public outrage at this barbaric act perpetrated by the same genre of terrorists that plagued Algeria for over a decade; the justification/encouragement of the killings by the number two man in the banned FIS party Ali Benhadj; and the GSPC's praise of the murders has led many to reconsider or qualify their support for the plan. Yet, Bouteflika and his governing coalition still see National Reconciliation as a necessity, although with a less ambitious timeline in light of the current situation. Foreign Minister Bedjaoui said July 30 that the referendum will go forward, but in light of the recent events it will need more reflection. The leaders of the major political parties, FLN (National Liberation Front, RND (National Democratic Rally), MSP (Movement for a Society of Peace), and the Opposition Islamist Islah Party continue publicly to support the President. President of the Human Rights Commission and the Ad Hoc Mechanism (for the disappeared) Farouk Ksentini also gave his enthusiastic

support. Others who support National Reconciliation include: President of the National Union of Algerian Zaouias (Sufi orders) Chaalal Mahmoud Omar, and far left Worker's Party leader Louiza Hanoune.

WHO IS AGAINST NATIONAL RECONCILIATION?

9. (C) Not surprisingly, the most outspoken groups against National Reconciliation are the families of the disappeared, who have been vehemently opposed to the General Amnesty portion of the plan. While some of the Disparus groups are against a General Amnesty in any form, most are willing to entertain the idea of a limited General Amnesty, if a type of "truth commission" is established. Their major concern is extending an amnesty to people with blood on their hands. While the groups do not differentiate between those who committed the crimes (terrorists versus security forces), they are agreed that those who committed human rights violations, particularly rape and murder, must not be granted amnesty. Joining the Disparus groups are international NGOs, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, who have been critical of Bouteflika's process of going about National Reconciliation and General Amnesty. In addition to being opposed to the lack of transparency on the contents of the plan itself, the NGOs believe that any amnesty without some type of judicial hearings or truth commission will harm the country in the long run.

10. (C) Disparus groups SOS Disparus, Le Collectif des Familles des Disparus en Algerie, The National Association of the Families of the Disappeared, and the Algerian League of Human Rights (LADDH) all echo the same sentiment. First and foremost they want the truth. They want to know what happened to their family members and then, possibly, they might consider a reconciliation of some kind. To these groups, the idea of National Reconciliation without judicial inquiries is premature.

HOW WILL BOUTEFLIKA MAKE THE REFERENDUM SUCCEED?

11. (C) Embassy sources and the majority of the press believe that Bouteflika will use all "weapons" at his disposal to make sure the referendum passes. The first weapon Bouteflika has in his arsenal is the influence of the Presidential alliance, led by its standard bearer, FLN, but also joined by the RND and the MSP political parties. Mobilizing the members and student organizations of the MSP could be especially crucial to the outcome of the referendum. Former Foreign Minister and current Minister of State Belkhadem in his capacity as head of the FLN can almost certainly secure the votes of the conservative former FIS members. Second, Bouteflika can probably count on the support of the senior military, security apparatus, and those aligned with them. They are hopeful an amnesty will help eliminate any residual support for terrorist groups, which have been increasingly marginalized. Third, and most critical, the President will play on the fears of ordinary citizens reminded by recent terrorist acts, including the execution of two Algerian diplomats in Iraq. Bouteflika is expected to argue that the alternative to National Reconciliation -- as embodied by the referendum -- is further Algerian disunity and the potential for slippage toward more insecure times. It is this fear, ripe for exploitation on the heels of recent prominent terrorist acts, that in the view of dispassionate Embassy sources will ultimately turn the tide in Bouteflika's favor.

ERDMAN